

# Sewer district promotes discount for low-income, older customers

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Plain Dealer Reporter

Seventy-two-year-old Charlotte Kroll has a target on her back. She lives in Cleveland, is on a tight budget and qualifies for a program that would reduce her sewer bill by 40 percent next year.

But Kroll doesn't appear to be getting that discount, which for a typical homeowner is about \$140 a year.

So the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District has targeted her and thousands of people like her in an extensive effort that includes talks by officials at dozens of community meetings, an advertising campaign in local media and a mailing to the home of every customer in 62 communities.

The goal is to get people who qualify for assistance signed up as the sewer district braces for a five-year series of rate increases that will average about 13 percent annually for residential customers.

About half the senior citizens who qualify for the district's Homestead Program aren't taking advantage of it, a Plain Dealer analysis of data from the sewer district and U.S. Census Bureau found.

"I think it's wonderful that they came in here and brought it to our attention," Kroll said after a lunch meeting Tuesday in which two sewer officials spoke to about 75 senior citizens at Cleveland's Gunning Park Recreation Center. "I just wouldn't have paid attention to this otherwise."

As the audience ate a tasty lunch of pork, rice, vegetables and peaches, sewer district spokeswoman Jennifer Elting and Jean Chapman talked about the "nasty raw sewage" the district treats — how there's enough in a year to fill Cleveland Browns Stadium 113 times — and explained the details of three programs that might help with sewer bills.

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### Sewer bill discounts available for some

They are:

■ An existing Homestead Program that provides a 33 percent discount to people who own homes, are 65 or older or permanently disabled, and have an annual household income of \$30,385 or less. Next year the Homestead Program discount will increase to 40 percent and it's likely that the income limit will rise as well, allowing more people into the program.

■ A new Wastewater Affordability Program that next year will provide a 40 percent discount to homeowners of any age who are at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$44,700 for a family of four.

■ A new crisis voucher program that is expected for next year and will provide one-time assistance of up to \$300 for people who've lost a job, had a medical emergency, or are going through a divorce.

For more information about these programs, call the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District customer service line at 216-881-8247. You can also call this number if you'd like sewer district officials to speak to a group.

Betty Shutes, a social worker at the Gunning center, said any money that could be saved by the West Side senior citizens she sees would mean a lot. Nearly all are on very tight budgets.

"They have to buy food,"

Shutes said. "A lot of them have medical bills."

Chapman said there's been confusion among customers. For example, some senior citizens think that because they get a county "Homestead" discount on their property taxes, they also are automatically enrolled in the sewer district's Homestead Program. They are not.

Chapman said the district wants to make sure everyone knows about the discounts as they prepare for a series of rate increases that will begin Jan. 1.

Over five years, the average suburban household's quarterly bills will go from \$90 today to \$157 in 2016, while for the average Cleveland household the increase will be from \$84 to \$154. (The increase is a little steeper for Cleveland residents because they have paid less than the suburbs for sewer service, a discrepancy that's being eliminated.)

But a typical customer in the Homestead Program, who tends to use less water, will see quarterly bills go up just \$7, from about \$30 today to \$37 in 2016.

At the Gunning center, Kroll gathers information about the Homestead Program discount. She's in great shape and likes to take part in the many bus trips offered by the Gunning center. She doesn't need any convincing about the importance of saving money.

"We have a lot of bus trips, to the Croatian Lodge, a few of the casinos," she said. "This would pay for my trips, get me out of the house. It would be a god-send."

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